

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS

May 18, 2021

1:06 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Chris Tuck, Chair
Representative Andi Story
Representative Geran Tarr
Representative Matt Claman
Representative George Rauscher
Representative Laddie Shaw
Representative David Nelson

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE RESOLUTION NO. 9

Encouraging the homeporting of new United States Coast Guard icebreakers in the state.

- MOVED HR 9 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PRESENTATION: REDEFINING VETERAN SUCCESS

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HR 9

SHORT TITLE: HOMEPORT ICEBREAKERS IN AK

SPONSOR(s): REPRESENTATIVE(s) KREISS-TOMKINS

WITNESS REGISTER

REPRESENTATIVE JONATHAN KREISS-TOMKINS

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, introduced HR 9.

KYLE KAISER, President

VIPER Transitions

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint on VIPER Transitions during the presentation on Redefining Veteran Success.

RYAN GOERTSEN, Vice-President of Aviation Workforce
AAR Corp
Chicago, Illinois

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided information during the presentation on Redefining Veteran Success.

ACTION NARRATIVE

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CHAIR CHRIS TUCK called the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting to order at 1:06 p.m. Representatives Nelson, Claman, Tarr, Story, Shaw, and Tuck were present at the call to order. Representative Rauscher arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HR 9-HOMEPORT ICEBREAKERS IN AK

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CHAIR TUCK announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE RESOLUTION NO. 9, "Encouraging the homeporting of new United States Coast Guard icebreakers in the state."

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REPRESENTATIVE JONATHAN KREISS-TOMKINS, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, introduced HR 9 as a simple resolution that says all due consideration should be given to Alaska, as the only Arctic state, in homeporting decisions for the new U.S. Coast Guard icebreakers. He described learning that the Coast Guard was proposing a renovation and expansion of its Seattle, Washington, base in anticipation of homeporting its icebreakers. He stated the desire to keep assets that "rightfully belong to Alaska" within the state and expressed frustration that 1,000 employees of the Alaska Fisheries Science Center, dedicated solely to managing Alaska fisheries, live and work in Seattle. He held that there are notable Coast Guard assets within Alaska, in particular the Port of Nome, and described working with Representative McCabe, a Coast Guard veteran, in drafting the proposed resolution.

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REPRESENTATIVE NELSON observed that the article from The Seattle Times [included in the committee packet] stated that the Coast Guard first announced the intention to homeport the icebreakers in Seattle in 2019. He asked whether there were discussions at the time about suggesting Alaska as the homeport.

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS replied, "No, this is the first time that the legislature has advocated homeporting [icebreakers] in Alaska." He said homeporting decisions have not been made for several icebreakers.

REPRESENTATIVE NELSON asked whether the ports in Alaska are capable of housing vessels the size of the icebreakers.

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS stated his understanding that the Coast Guard base in Kodiak has substantial facilities, and if a base with sufficient capacity doesn't exist in Alaska, it should. He opined that appropriations to sustain homeporting large vessels should go to ports and associated communities in Alaska instead of out of state. He said research vessel (RV) Fairweather, with a \$20 million appropriation, is homeported in Astoria, Oregon when it should be in Ketchikan.

CHAIR TUCK expressed his agreement with Representative Kreiss-Tomkins' statements and noted that Kodiak has the largest Coast Guard base in the world.

REPRESENTATIVE NELSON suggested editing the language of the proposed resolution to include encouraging investment in Alaska's ports.

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REPRESENTATIVE TARR asked Representative Kreiss-Tomkins whether he felt offering a backup option would strengthen the proposed resolution, in case the Coast Guard doesn't want to homeport its entire fleet in Alaska.

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS explained that this proposed resolution isn't intended to encourage homeporting all vessels in Alaska at the exclusion of Seattle, but to declare that the bulk of the vessels should be in Alaska. He expressed that, due to the haste in drafting the proposed resolution, he is agreeable to any necessary reframing.

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CHAIR TUCK reminded committee members that HR 9 is a simple resolution that doesn't need committee referral.

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REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER noted that the planning process for Coast Guard base improvements began the prior week, which started the 45-day public comment period. He asked whether HR 9 is intended "to be a public comment for this public commenting period."

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS responded that the goal of the proposed resolution is to give the Alaska congressional delegation another tool in their advocacy for homeporting icebreakers in Alaska. He specified that HR 9 would be delivered to U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan.

REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER referred to page 2, lines 26-28, of the proposed resolution, which read "**BE IT RESOLVED** that the House of Representatives encourages proposed new United States Coast Guard icebreakers to be strategically homeported in the state rather than in the Port of Seattle." He suggested replacing "in the state rather than in the Port of Seattle." with "in Alaska rather than in the Port of Seattle."

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS expressed his agreement.

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REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked Representative Kreiss-Tomkins whether he had shared the proposed resolution with the Coast Guard.

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS responded that the plan is to send HR 9 to "any and every" relevant entity, which would include the Coast Guard. He said there is a teleconference with the Alaska congressional delegation planned for the end of May, during which icebreaker homeporting would be addressed.

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CHAIR TUCK discussed his sponsorship of House Resolution 13, introduced during the Thirty-First Alaska State Legislature, which was a resolution to name an icebreaker "Polar Bear" in recognition of the U.S. Revenue Cutter (USRC) Bear, commissioned to USRC Service in 1885. It served as a federal court and patrolled, surveyed, and delivered mail and supplies in Alaska until its decommission in 1929.

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REPRESENTATIVE TARR expressed that she was satisfied with the information provided by Representative Kreiss-Tomkins and would not offer any amendments.

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The committee took a brief at-ease.

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REPRESENTATIVE TARR referred to the previously suggested change in the text [in HR 9, page 2, line 27] from "in the state" to "in Alaska", and suggested it could be made now as a conceptual amendment.

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS replied that he would consult with Representative McCabe as co-drafter to specify the new language. He said that he may suggest a floor resolution and expressed his hope for a unanimous adoption.

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CHAIR TUCK opened public testimony on HR 9. After ascertaining that no one wished to testify, he closed public testimony.

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REPRESENTATIVE TARR moved to report HR 9 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying zero fiscal note. There being no objection, HR 9 was moved out of the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs.

PRESENTATION: Redefining Veteran Success

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CHAIR TUCK announced that the final order of business would be a presentation by Kyle Kaiser, President, VIPER Transitions Program.

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KYLE KAISER, President, VIPER Transitions, introduced Ryan Goertsen of AAR Corp, one of VIPER's partners, to describe the

value of the program from an employer's perspective, and he said he would present a PowerPoint on VIPER [Veteran Internships Providing Employment Readiness] Transitions ("VIPER") following Mr. Goertsen's remarks.

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RYAN GOERTSEN, Vice-President of Aviation Workforce, AAR Corp, said that AAR Corp ("AAR") is a global and aerospace company headquartered in Chicago, with maintenance repair and overhaul facilities throughout the U.S. He described AAR's Ethics, Airworthiness, Greatness, Leadership, Engagement (EAGLE) Career Pathway Program, which works with schools and communities to educate students about a career path in aviation maintenance. He said AAR granted VIPER Transitions \$25,000 for investment in equipment and subsequently developed its 12-week Skillbridge Program based on Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) curriculum and in partnership with the Aeronautical Repair Station Association (ARSA) and the Aviation Institute of Maintenance (AIM). He explained that, as a large employer of skilled technicians, AAR had over 200 openings prior to COVID-19 and noted that careers in aviation maintenance are lucrative. Mr. Goertsen explained that Mr. Kaiser approached him about applying AAR's EAGLE Career Pathway Program to veterans and highlighted the skills veterans acquire during their period of service, which would often be a natural fit with AAR's programs.

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MR. KAISER began his PowerPoint presentation with slide 2, "Our Mission," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

To end veteran suicide through the elimination of its main causes: veteran unemployment, underemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, and a fractured support system. We work to accomplish our mission through preemployment training, resource networking, outreach, and the inclusion of military spouses in our programs.

MR. KAISER stressed that the program is designed to "catch veterans before they're in crisis," which is done by eliminating the gap between military and civilian careers. He presented slide 4, "What We Do," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRAINING

- Our programs guarantee placement in a career. Whether the participant receives direct entry into an apprenticeship or learns needed skills through an internship, VIPER participants are set up for success.

RESOURCE NETWORKING

- Participants are introduced to numerous Veterans Service Organizations, the VA system, and a community of fellow veterans already employed in the participants' future career. Providing mentorship and introduction to valuable resources before they are needed.

OUTREACH

- Outreach programs establish a quality connection with participants allowing VIPER to assess and clearly understand participant's career needs, while providing an opportunity to answer questions and concerns they may have about their transition from the military. We strive to ensure veterans know we are here for them through combating invasive species in Operation Combat Pike, deep sea fishing with Fish to End 22, staffing a booth at job fairs, or simply participating in veteran focused events.

MR. KAISER presented slide 5, "Operation Combat Pike," which displayed a picture of two men fishing. He said that both men are now "happily employed," one as an electrician and the other working in communications. Slide 5 read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

VIPER introduces veterans to resources available to them through other Veteran Serving Organizations, the VA, and more.

Veterans meet other veterans already in their prospective career field and have direct contact numbers for people committed to supporting them through transition.

This program also assists the State of Alaska in combating invasive Northern Pike.

MR. KAISER paraphrased slide 6, "Fish To End 22," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

This program operates primarily on the East Coast.

Like Operation Combat Pike veterans are introduced to resources and a support network.

This program also competes in fishing tournaments where the proceeds go to fund VIPER training programs.

MR. KAISER explained that Fish To End 22 is an outreach program during which veterans are educated on resources and support networks while on a fishing trip. He said in that type of setting a veteran is much more likely to retain information. He explained, "To us, they're not a number. In order to end veteran suicide, you can't treat them like they're a number and just pump them through a process. It doesn't work, there's plenty of evidence to show the system currently doesn't work, and so we're trying to change it up."

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MR. KAISER presented slide 7, "Honoring The Past," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

The Veteran Suicide Epidemic is not a new problem. Mental health, employment, and other related issues have been present in the transition of veterans into civilian life for decades.

VIPER honors our military heritage by utilizing historical pieces to serve as training tools in our programs.

Pictured to the left is the donated R4D that the VIPER Aviation Maintenance program uses. It served as a Marine VIP Transport.

MR. KAISER said that the plane pictured in the slide will be restored, then used to transport veterans from around the state to attend training. He then presented slide 8, "Who We Have Helped," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

VIPER has successfully helped integrate 100 Veterans into quality careers.

VIPER has placed 3 Military Spouses into careers.

VIPER has partnered with over 15 organizations and companies spanning across Alaska and the United States.

MR. KAISER explained that multiple generations of veterans are involved with VIPER including those from World War II, the Korean War, and operations in Iraq. He then presented slide 9, "How VIPER Programs Work," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

- Anyone who partners with VIPER is required sign an agreement with VIPER.
- The agreement requires to the company to sign a contract with the veteran or military spouse to be employed with the company which guarantees; hire after separation, wages and benefits to be received, and the training needed for the veteran to be employed.
- After the VIPER applicant and the employer have reached an agreement on the terms of the arrangement, VIPER works with the employer to facilitate the Skillbridge process.

MR. KAISER said, "There are many programs that will take a vet, charge them their GI bill, give them a certificate that doesn't lead to a job, say 'Thank you for your service,' and pass them out the door." He contrasted VIPER's program, which first focuses on job placement and then on the training to be successful in the job. He presented slide 10, "Programs," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

The following are our most active programs:

- VIPER Ironworkers
- Veterans Electrical Entry Program (VEEP)
- VIPER Aviation Maintenance Program
- SMART Heroes
- VIPER Mechanics Internships
- VIPER Lab Tech Internships

MR. KAISER presented slide 11, "Demographics," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

- Approximately 200,000 veterans transition out of the military every year
<https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO19-438R>

- 88% Veterans who go to college after transition drop out. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/veterans-college-dropout_n_2016926
- There are approximately 18.8 million Veterans in the United States. Making up almost 8% of the population.
 - Veterans make up approximately 1/3 of Alaska's population.
 - Dunbars number for individual relationships is 150, if you use a more conservative number of 5 close personal friends, Veterans can directly affect approximately 94 million Americans. 28.6% of America's population.
 - <https://www.ncsl.org/blog/2017/11/10/veterans-bythe-numbers.aspx>

MR. KAISER presented slide 12, "Reasons We Are The Solution," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

- Mission and Purpose
 - Our programs present transitioning veterans with a new mission: To have a successful career as civilians
 - Our careers represent a new purpose: to be the best craftsmen in their industry and support fellow veterans
- We are the answer to:
 - "What do I do now?"
 - "How do I provide for my family?"
 - "What is my purpose? Where do I belong?"

MR. KAISER expressed that there's nothing more frustrating as a highly-skilled, experienced, and capable veteran than when someone offers to help. He explained, "I don't need your 'help.' I could use a little support to get my feet going, and then I'll take it from there." He said VIPER aims to give veterans and their spouses the opportunity to succeed on their own. He concluded his presentation with slide 13, "Conclusion," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Veterans serve our State and our Nation with honor. It is up to us to serve them as they transition into civilian life.

One veteran lost to suicide, is one too many.

As a community, a State, and a Nation we must do better to support veteran reintegration.

VIPER is here to see to it that every veteran is given an opportunity to have the American Dream they fought to defend.

MR. KAISER said VIPER Transitions has no paid staff and has received no government grants but is entirely funded through private donations. He also noted that the organization doesn't charge the government issue (GI) Bill due to his belief that a veteran shouldn't have to use it in order to get a job.

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REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER asked whether this presentation is a preamble to a bill.

CHAIR TUCK replied that it is not, but it could be if, as a result of the presentation, opportunities for veterans' assistance could be identified.

REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER asked Mr. Kaiser whether the statistics included in the presentation are from Alaska.

MR. KAISER replied that the statistics came from Alaska. He noted that VIPER has recently received recognition from the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) for its partnership with AAR.

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REPRESENTATIVE NELSON expressed his support for VIPER Transitions and said, "It's a little tough for an individual, once they get out, well-distinguished in their career, to then be reduced down to stocking shelves at Fred Meyer because their resume might translate really well to military life but not necessarily over onto civilian life."

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REPRESENTATIVE TARR expressed that this topic is very personal to her since her brother, who was a veteran, died by suicide. She wished VIPER "great success" and said that she hopes for future opportunities to support veterans.

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REPRESENTATIVE STORY stated her gratitude for the program. She then asked how long VIPER has been a national organization and whether there would be a branch in Juneau.

MR. KAISER responded that the program for electricians became a national program immediately. He then described the process of the program, beginning with someone choosing a career path and location, after which VIPER reaches out to the appropriate training centers and secures direct entry into an apprenticeship program. Upon leaving the military, he explained, the veteran transitions directing into the training program and, after achieving proficiency, transfers to the previously-arranged apprenticeship. He said that training centers can be located almost anywhere, and in lieu of getting training directly from VIPER, a veteran could enter into an internship with a potential employer to train in the skills unique to that employer.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked whether Mr. Kaiser has had many referrals in Alaska and how he communicates with veterans' organizations about the program.

MR. KAISER responded that there have been several referrals from across Alaska and most of the program participants have been Alaskan. He said that many of the career paths targeted by VIPER are in "hands-on" fields that require the veteran to move to where the work is. Mr. Kaiser also described VIPER's involvement with several different veterans' communities and networking with career counselors and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked how VIPER networks with businesses.

MR. KAISER replied, "Word-of-mouth. I've done a lot of door knocking and really, what I've noticed with the Alaska business community, that tends to be the best way." He stated that he is a "California transplant" who is not well known within the Alaska business community, but VIPER gets referrals.

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ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting was adjourned at 1:56 p.m.